

Diakonia in the Early Letters of Paul

M. V. ABRAHAM*

Diakonia can mean several things in the Pauline churches : it can mean the ministry of Paul and his co-workers, the act of preaching and founding churches (apostolic ministry) ; it can mean the exercise of the various and diversified ministries within the church (cf. the ministry of the apostles, prophets and teachers in 1 Cor. 12 : 28) ; it can also mean the exercise of the various spiritual gifts (*charismata*) in the congregation (1 Cor. 12-14). This paper will mostly deal with the first type, i.e., Paul's apostolic ministry as evident in 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, I and 2 Corinthians.

There was no single concept of apostleship before Paul's time Paul uses the term *apostolos* in a comprehensive sense to include the missionaries or preachers of the Gospel, church-workers, envoys of churches, and of course, in the restrictive sense to refer to the Twelve and to himself (1 Thes. 2 : 7 ; 1 Cor. 4 : 9 ; 9 : 5 ; 12 : 28 ; 15 : 7 ; Rom. 16 : 7 ; Phil. 2 : 25 ; Gal. 1 : 17, 19 ; 1 Cor. 15 : 5). While Paul includes himself with the Twelve under the label 'apostles', he includes himself also with the preachers of the Gospel whom he calls apostles (1 Thes 1 : 1 ; 2 : 7 ; 2 Thes. 1 : 1). As Rudolf Schnackenburg puts it : 'in a unique way Paul connects the consciousness of apostolic authority with his understanding of apostleship (cf. 1 Thes. 2 : 7 ; 2 Cor. 10 : 8 ; 13 : 10), i.e., with charismatic preaching as he did.'¹

Paul is overwhelmingly conscious of his call to apostleship which is the commission to preach God's salvific act in Christ. In as much as he participates in this unique and once and for all event (an eschatological event) by making it known to others through his preaching, Paul's ministry has an eschatological

* Dr. M. V. Abraham is Professor of New Testament at Leonard Theological College, Jabalpur.

¹ R. Schnackenburg, 'Apostles before and during Paul's Time' in W. W. Gasque and R. P. Martin, eds., *Apostolic History and the Gospel*, Exeter : The Paternoster Press, 1970, p. 303.

character. It is also a continuation of the ministry of Christ. The apostle participates in the spreading of the Gospel as well as shares in its victory (2 Cor. 2 : 14). Since the Gospel, by its very nature, is the dividing line between 'the perishing' and those 'who are being saved' (2 Cor. 2 : 15f.), the apostle is engaged in a ministry at the overlapping of the two 'ages'—(the present and the coming).

The relation between God's plan for the world and God's will for Paul to become a part of that divine plan is an important aspect of Paul's awareness concerning his ministry and apostleship (Col. 1 : 1, 13). This awareness of being called to play a decisive part in the drama of salvation provides the content and legitimacy to Paul's ministry on the one hand, and a sense of urgency on the other ('the *now* of salvation'—2 Cor. 6 : 2 ; the *anagkē* in 1 Cor. 9 : 16b). The *eschaton*, instead of being a possibility in the remote future, has become a present reality in Christ. The apostle is called to witness to this decisive event, and there is no time to be wasted (Rom. 13 : 11f.). This conviction of Paul as one standing at the penultimate stage of the drama of salvation (a sort of eschatological messenger), which has already begun in Christ and is moving to its denouement, made him see himself as one set apart by God even before his birth (Gal. 1 : 15 ; cp. Jer. 1 : 5). This 'eschatologic awareness' of Paul, minus its apocalyptic framework and orientation to an imminent *parousia*, could still be the justification and motivation for ministry in our age.

The relation between the apostle and the message

There is a close relation between the apostle and his message (Gospel). The Gospel has priority over the preacher (Gal. 1 : 8). The minister is only the earthen vessel to hold the treasure (2 Cor. 4 : 7) ; he is the instrument which disseminates the fragrance of the Gospel (2 Cor. 2 : 14-15). The close relation between the Gospel and the preacher, evident in Paul's life, is obvious in the phrases that Paul uses : 'my Gospel' (Rom. 2 : 16 ; 16 : 25) and 'our Gospel' (1 Thes. 1 : 5 ; 2 Thes. 2 : 14). Paul has identified himself so much with the Gospel that he could even look at his imprisonment as a means of furthering the cause of the Gospel (Phil. 1 : 12). Paul becomes 'all things to all men' for the sake of the Gospel (1 Cor. 9 : 22). For Paul the legitimacy of apostleship is dependent on the truthful presentation of the Gospel (Gal. 1 : 8).

The traditional qualification for one to be called an apostle was to be associated with the earthly Jesus and to be a firsthand witness to the resurrection (Acts 1 : 21-22 ; 1 Cor. 9 : 1 ; 15 : 8). To these Paul adds a new qualification : one's work for Christ.

and the Gospel (1 Cor. 9 : 1b). The congregation or the community of the faithful is the most tangible proof of apostolic ministry (1 Cor. 9 : 2 ; 2 Cor. 3 : 2). For Paul apostleship is not a static concept centred around the office of apostle (minister) but a dynamic concept whose legitimacy is linked with the actual exercise of the ministry (apostolate).

Paul puts the community above the office of the apostle or minister. In Gal. 2 : 11 Paul challenges Peter on this principle. In the Corinthian church he curbs those who speak in tongues and refuses permission to the prophetesses to speak (1 Cor. 12-14). Thus he sets limits to the manifestations of the *pneuma* which indwells the community. In the face of claims put forth in the name of the Spirit and of those endowed with *charismata*, Paul recalls the community to its senses with the words : ' do not become the slaves of men ' (1 Cor. 7 : 23).

It is not the mere possession of the charisma but the mode in which it is exercised that is decisive for Paul. Paul's theory of order is not a static one resting on office, institution, rank and dignity. In his view the authority of the minister resides within the actual act of ministry, the act by which the *kurios* announces his lordship and his presence. The greatest gift or charisma that one could get (' the more excellent way ') is *agapē*. *Agapē* for Paul is not a virtue which moves the individual with a charismatic gift to make certain concessions to the brotherhood. It is much more a critical attitude over against all *charismata* because they are always liable to overestimate or abuse their spiritual endowment and confuse their own authority with that of the Lord. Only when the authority of the office is understood as belonging properly to the Giver (Lord) alone, does authority become relevant and *diakonia* become the *diakonia* of the Lord. That the office of the apostle (minister) is a gift received from God is amply evident in Paul's stout defence of his apostleship in Galatians 1 : 1-2.

Just as we have seen earlier that the Gospel has precedence over the preacher, the community (*ecclesia*) also has precedence over the minister. Both these are amply evident in the Pauline congregations. Whenever the office or the persons endowed with *charismata* tried to put themselves above the community, Paul puts a check to it.²

The relation between suffering and ministry

Suffering is nothing unusual in the life of an apostle (1 Cor. 4 : 9-13 ; 2 Cor. 4 : 8-12 ; 12 : 10). At the same time it is not

² E. Käsemann, 'Ministry and Community in the New Testament', *Essays on New Testament Themes*, London : SCM Press, 1964, pp. 63-94.

something which is the particular experience of the apostle. It is the lot of all Christians to endure suffering for the sake of Christ and their faith. But the apostle standing in the vanguard of the battle bears the brunt of the attack (2 Cor. 10 : 5). Paul glories in his weakness (*astheneia*) because it is precisely through weakness that he experiences his strength (2 Cor. 12 : 10). Suffering for Paul is at once the identification with the crucified Lord as well as the fact of his existence. The ongoing nature of suffering and its gruesomeness is portrayed through the expression : ' carrying the dying of Jesus in our bodies ' (2 Cor. 4 : 10). The marks on his body (cf. the lashes he received in 2 Cor. 11 : 24) may have remained as a permanent reminder of his participation in the sufferings of Christ (Gal. 6 : 17) ; Paul uses the expression ' the fellowship of his sufferings ' in Philippians 3 : 10. Adolf Deissmann has rightly noted that Paul was more of a *Christophoros* than a *Christologos*,³ i.e., Paul's witness through his life and his sufferings in the ministry of the Gospel was a stronger testimony than his testimony through words.

Thus Paul is setting new norms of the ministry. To be called and commissioned to be a minister (the office of the minister or bishop), however important it may be, is not enough. The more important criterion is one's work for Christ. Ministry assumes a greater measure of credibility when the minister has earned the respect and authority through his enduring hardship for the sake of the people whom he ministers to. Paul's apostolic authority, besides his call and commission by the Lord, is that which he has earned as a preacher of the Gospel (' I have begotten you through the Gospel ' 1 Cor. 4 : 15b ; ' you are the seal of my apostleship ' —1 Cor. 9 : 2b) and that which he has earned by his suffering for the sake of Christ and his Gospel. This dimension of authority is something natural to the Indian ethos, a country with its tradition of great souls such as Mahatma Gandhi, Jaya Prakash Narayan and others.

Paul's apologies for the ministry

In 1 Thessalonians 2 : 1-12 ; 1 Corinthians 1-4, 9 ; and 2 Corinthians 2 : 14-7 ; 4 ; 10-13 we see Paul's strong defence of ministry.

In 1 Thessalonians 2 : 1-12 Paul explains the motives and manner of his ministry in Thessalonica. The legitimacy of his apostleship hinges on two things : (i) his call to be an apostle from God (cf. Gal. 1 : 1) ; (ii) his message which was from God. As apostles, Paul and his co-workers could have wielded their authority heavily

³ A. Deissmann, *Paul*, London : Hodder & Stoughton, 1926, p. 136.

over the Thessalonians as well as claimed maintenance from them (v. 7a), but they were gentle among them as nurses deal with the children in their care. Instead of lording over them Paul ministered among them through the testimony of his word and life (v. 8). Paul stresses the conduct and the life-style of the minister referring to his own example.

Another striking feature of Paul's ministry in Thessalonica is the manner of his preaching the Gospel. Paul is not tempted to follow the method of some of the popular preachers of his day who tried to please people through their words, and for material gain (vv.4-6). The message is given prominence by Paul. Paul continues his ministry in strengthening the converts through his exhortations.

In 1 Corinthians chs. 1-4 Paul uses certain terms to describe his task as a ministry of the Gospel. As an apostle and as a minister of the Gospel Paul consider himself as a *hupēretēs* (servant) and an *oikonomos* (steward) of the mystery of God (1 Cor. 4 : 1-2). According to Rengstorf⁴ the *hupēretēs* differed from the *diakonos*. In the job of a *diakonos* the accent is on the objective advantage his service brings to the one to whom it is rendered. The *hupēretēs* willingly learns his task and goal from another who is over him in an organic order, but without prejudice to his personal dignity and worth. The *hupēretēs* is never a *doulos*, but he is always free and can claim a reward for his work. We see Paul, the *hupēretēs* voluntarily forgoing his reward so that the cause of the Gospel would not suffer (1 Cor. 9 : 18).

As one entrusted with the Gospel Paul calls himself an *oikonomos* of the mystery of God. According to John Reumann⁵ *oikonomia* (stewardship) can mean either Paul's administration of his apostolic office (1 Cor. 4 : 1 ; 9 : 17 ; Col 1 : 25) or God's administration of the world and salvation (Eph. 1 : 10 ; 3 : 9 ; Col. 1 : 25). The term *oikonomos* expresses both the nature of Paul's commission as well as the content of his message.

In 1 Cor. 3 : 5 Paul describes Apollos and himself as *diakonoi* through whom the Corinthians believed the Gospel, and there fore their work was *diakonia* (ministry). The terms *diakonos* and *diakonia* are used sixteen and eighteen times respectively in Pauline writings (excluding Ephesians). According to Murphy-O' Connor,⁶ *diakonos* is a more dynamic concept than *doulos*. The servant concept shows the urgency of his mission (cf. 1 Cor. 9 : 16b).

⁴ K. H. Rengstorf, 'Hupēretēs' in *TDNT*, VIII, pp. 532f.

⁵ J. Reumann, 'Oikonomia—terms in Paul', *New Testament Studies*, XIII, p. 157.

⁶ J. Murphy-O'Connor, *Paul on Preaching*, New York : Sheed & Ward, 1964, p. 60.

Another term that Paul uses to describe his ministry is *sunergos theou*. Paul describes Apollos and himself as *sunergoi theou* in 1 Cor. 3 : 9. This expression has been interpreted either as God's fellow-workers or as fellow-workers for God. I am inclined to go along with the interpretation that V. P. Furnish adopts in his article : 'Fellow-workers in God's Service',⁷ where the emphasis is on the work (ministry) rather than on the workers. 2 Cor. 2 : 14-7 : 4. In verse 14 Paul describes the triumph of the Gospel through the metaphor of a victory parade. The apostle shares in this victory celebration because it is through him the Gospel is spread. The fragrance (knowledge of God) has been spread everywhere through the preaching of the Gospel. Paul's idea of spreading the Gospel everywhere has a parallel in Jeremiah's vision of the Messianic age, when all will know God (Jer. 31 : 34).

In verse 15 Paul describes himself and the other ministers of the Gospel thus : 'we are the aroma (*euōdia*) of Christ to God.' Christ became an 'aroma' to God through his sacrificial death. The apostle or minister of Christ who spreads the good news of Christ's death identifies himself with that aroma (Gospel). At the same time Paul goes on to say that none is worthy or sufficient (*hikanos*) (verse 16) for this great privilege. In v. 17 Paul isolates himself from the *polloi* (*loipoi* in some MSS)—the popular preachers of his day such as the Sophists 'who sold their intellectual wares for cash' (the word *kapēleuō* used in this verse was the word originally used for 'peddling'). He speaks in the name of Christ and of God.

In 2 Corinthians 3 : 6 Paul and his co-workers are described as the 'ministers of the new covenant' (cf. 2 Cor. 11 : 23). Verses 4-6 emphasize that Paul's sufficiency is not in himself but from the One (God) who has qualified him and the others for the ministry (cf. 2 Cor. 4 : 1—'having been entrusted with this ministry by the mercy of God'). In 4 : 2-6 Paul makes a stout defence of the manner of his ministry as a preacher. Paul was particular that his message was Jesus Christ and not himself (a self-effacing ministry). He is only a *doulos* of the people for Jesus' sake. Though Paul as an apostle had a certain authority over the people, Paul as a preacher of the Gospel of Christ was only a slave or servant of the people. This understanding of ministry shows two things : (i) the message has precedence over the preacher ; (ii) the minister is a servant of the community and ministry has its validity only in relation to and for the community. The minister is only a fragile vessel which contains the treasure (the Gospel) (4 : 7).

In 2 Corinthians 4 : 8-12 Paul uses a series of antitheses to express

⁷ V. P. Furnish, 'Fellow-workers in God's Service', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 80, pp. 364-70.

the suffering and victory of the apostle. The apostle's suffering in the process of fulfilling his ministry is patterned on the suffering and victory (death and resurrection) of the Lord and therefore it has an 'epiphanic character.' As Tannehill puts it: 'for Paul the idea of participating in Jesus' death and resurrection is not a mere theological generality but a means of understanding the particular experiences of his own life'⁸

In 2 Corinthians 5 : 19b Paul speaks of the ministry of reconciliation which has been committed to him. God's act of reconciliation in Christ is the basis of ministry. The eschatological act of God becomes a present experience through the ministry of the apostles. Ministry is an ambassadorial work for Christ. The minister is a *presbus* or an ambassador of Christ who carries on his ministry of reconciliation (5 : 20). According to Käsemann, 'for Paul the facts of redemption cannot be separated from the word of Christian preaching They are undoubtedly the basis of Christian preaching, but without preaching we cannot have them at all.'⁹ Paul plays an important role in being the link between Christ the reconciler and the world, as Christ was the link between God and the world. Thus Paul's ministry is a continuation of the ministry of Christ.

2 Corinthians 10-13 is more of Paul's self defence against challenges to his apostolic status and apostolic authority. Even when Paul had to be on the defensive in the face of severe criticisms his primary concern is to make his spiritual children subservient to the authority of the Gospel. By connecting authority with apostleship in 10 : 8 and in 13 : 10, Paul gives the right interpretation of authority : authority is valid only if apostleship or ministry is valid ; authority is only to build up, not to destroy. It is interesting that Paul uses more often the word *parakaleo* (I exhort, I appeal) and rarely the word *paraggellō* (I command). While Paul's missionary methodology need not be the best for our day and situation, Paul's values and norms of ministry still hold good.

⁸ R. C. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ*, BZNW 32, Berlin : Verlag Alfred Töpelmann, 1967, p. 87.

⁹ E. Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul* (London : SCM Press, 1971), p. 50.